

Research Notes

Taking the Lead: Investing in Family Child Care

Licensed family child care (FCC) programs serve millions of children and families annually and tend to serve more vulnerable families than center-based programs. Low-income families, families needing infant and toddler care, and families that are Hispanic or African American are more likely to place their children in FCC programs than in center-based care (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2019; Porter, Paulsell, Del Gross, Avellar, Hass & Vuong, 2010). Additionally, because FCC programs tend to offer more flexibility in scheduling, families who require child care during extended or irregular hours are more likely to enroll their children in family child care (Henly & Adams, 2018).

Despite the critical need for FCC, the United States has seen a 48% decline in licensed small FCC homes between 2005 and 2017 and a 21% decrease in licensed large FCC homes between 2005 and 2017 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2019). Data also revealed a 51% decrease in licensed FCC programs receiving subsidy payments between 2005 and 2017 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2019). Taken together the data show an alarming trend in the loss of FCC programs and, with their closure, the loss of financial child care assistance for some of the most vulnerable children and families.

The 2019 report from the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, *Addressing the Decreasing Number of Family Child Care Providers in the United States*, lists a number of factors believed to contribute to the large attrition rate of family child care providers. These include: low compensation and lack of benefits; lack of business expertise leading to loss of revenue, low wages, and vacancies in enrollment; and other factors such as harsh job demands, retirement, and lack of respect. Additionally, the report points to new requirements and regulations, difficulty navigating or successfully participating in quality improvement systems, and difficulties accessing advancement opportunities as contributing factors to the field's decline (2019).

MEETING THE NEED FOR SPECIALIZED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Intensive professional learning opportunities that are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of family child care providers, delivered in a way that is responsive to their scheduling needs, and targeted to the knowledge and skills required to succeed as small business owners are scarce. Recognizing this need, in 2015 the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University launched a new initiative, Taking the Lead—A Family Child Care Leadership Academy.

Taking the Lead (TTL) has enrolled over 100 FCC providers in six cohorts since its inception. TTL has served as a vehicle for professional achievement, advancing the knowledge base and skill set of FCC providers in the Chicagoland area. TTL is delivered as a hybrid model that includes face-to-face classes and online coursework, as well as mentoring calls, emails, and group texts. Through reflective practice, supervised field experiences, and job-embedded activities participants explore how maintaining successful home-based business practices foster and maintain respectful, positive relationships with children and families.

TTL is designed to improve the quality of FCC programs by: 1) helping providers learn strategies for growing and sustaining a successful business, 2) enhancing work quality as business owners and educators, 3) fostering networking opportunities with other FCC providers, and 4) helping providers gain an understanding of their role as change agents in their communities. The primary focus for TTL is mastery of the competencies within the business, advocacy, and environment management content areas of the Family Child Care Credential, administered by Gateways to Opportunity, Illinois' professional development system for early care and education. TTL content is also aligned with the standards of ExceleRate™ Illinois QRIS, Illinois' quality recognition and improvement system for early childhood programs.

Data are collected as a regular part of TTL from a number of sources including: self-evaluation using items from the *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care* (BAS) and *Family Child*

Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R); pre- and post-Training Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS), participants' posting on the dedicated GroupMe text messaging site, as well as grades awarded on homework. In three cohorts, participants also participated in formal pre- and post-BAS assessments by a Certified BAS Assessor.

CURRENT STUDY

For this study, data were aggregated from the last three completed cohorts to explore four important questions. Does participation in TTL improve participants' knowledge and skills on topics related to business and professional practices, including the state's professional development and quality improvement systems? Does participation in TTL improve the quality of business and professional practices as measured by formal BAS assessments? Does participation in TTL lead to changes in QRIS, accreditation, or credentialing status? Does participation in TTL help stem the decline in FCC programs?

METHODOLOGY

Taking the Lead, cohorts #3, 4, and 5, included 54 FCC providers who operated programs serving a total of 572 children. Thirty-three programs served infants, 51 programs served toddlers, 48 programs served preschool-age children, and 36 programs served school-age children. Together, the programs served 289 children participating in the child care assistance program (CCAP) and 40 children identified with special needs. Prior to the start of participation in TTL, 20 programs were accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) and 28 programs had achieved a circle of quality in ExceleRate™ Illinois QRIS (11 at Bronze, 12 at Silver, and 5 at Gold).

To assess participants' level of perceived competence in business practices, a self-report Training Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS) was administered at the beginning of the program and again at the end. To measure improvements in business and professional practices, each program in cohorts #4 and 5 received a formal pre- and post-BAS assessment by a Certified BAS Assessor (Talan & Bloom, 2009). After the conclusion of TTL, participants were sent a Post-TTL survey asking about changes made during and after TTL related to accreditation, QRIS, and credentialing.

RESULTS

PERCEIVED PROVIDER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Does participation in TTL improve participants' knowledge and skills on topics related to business and professional practices, including the state's professional development and quality improvement systems? To assess this, the Training Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS) was administered at the beginning and end of TTL. The TNAS measures perceived knowledge and skills in fourteen areas on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *no knowledge or skill in this area* to 5 = *extremely knowledgeable or skillful in this area*). As Table 1 demonstrates, paired *t*-tests showed a significant increase in the average overall post-TNAS score as well as in all 14 areas of knowledge and skills.

CHANGES IN BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

Does participation in TTL result in an increase in the quality of business and professional practices as measured by formal BAS assessments? In addition to self-evaluations, formal pre- and post-BAS assessments were conducted for cohorts #4 and 5 to measure changes in business and professional practices. The average overall BAS score at pre-test was 2.86 with scores ranging from 1.40 to 4.78 on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *inadequate* to 7 = *excellent*). At post-test, the average overall BAS score increased to 3.68 with scores ranging from 2.10 to 5.89. This increase was statistically significant ($t = -10.18, p <.001$). As noted in Table 2, paired *t*-tests also showed that nine of the ten BAS item scores increased significantly between pre- and post-assessments. The average item scores for Income and Benefits, Qualifications and Professional Development, Recordkeeping, and Fiscal Management showed the largest gains.

ENGAGEMENT IN QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Does participation in TTL contribute to increased levels of engagement in quality improvement efforts as indicated by achievement of a circle of quality rating in ExceleRate Illinois' QRIS, national program accreditation, or a Family Child Care Credential? Participants in cohorts #3, 4, and 5 were asked to complete an online post-survey to learn about any program or professional changes made as a result of their participation in TTL. Forty-eight participants completed all or part of the post-survey.

Changes to Accreditation and QRIS Status

Eighteen (37%) of participants reported that since beginning TTL, they had applied to increase their level of recognition in ExceleRate Illinois QRIS. Nine (18%) participants reported that they had received or renewed their NAFCC accreditation since beginning TTL. Thirteen (27%) responded that since beginning TTL, they had newly joined a professional network or association.

Changes to Professional Credentials

We also asked former participants about changes to their credentials. Twenty (41%) reported that since beginning TTL, they had either earned a new Family Child Care Credential or had increased their previous Family Child Care Credential level. Ten (21%) reported that they had earned a new or increased the level of their Early Childhood Credential. Ten (21%) also reported that they had earned a new or increased the level of their Infant Toddler Credential. One participant reported earning the Illinois Director Credential. Five (10%) reported earning a new or increased the level of their School Age Credential. As a whole, participants in cohorts #3, 4, and 5 achieved 46 new or advanced Gateways to Opportunity credentials. These data, along with the increases in NAFCC accreditation and QRIS status, suggest that TTL offers a significant level of support as providers navigate state and national quality improvement systems and professional advancement opportunities.

DISCUSSION

Licensed family child care serves a critical need in America, yet we are seeing FCC programs going out of business at an alarming rate. One way to combat this decline may be to offer specialized professional development aimed to meet the unique needs of FCC providers and build their skills and knowledge as small business owners.

In this study we examined data from three cohorts of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership's Family Child Care Leadership Academy-Taking the Lead (TTL) and found that FCC providers who participated in this intensive professional development program significantly improved their knowledge and skills on topics related to business and professional practices, significantly increased their business and professional practices as measured by formal BAS assessments, and demonstrated increases in QRIS, accreditation, and credentialing status.

The findings demonstrate that TTL not only increases business competencies but also provides participants with opportunity for career and program advancement. Taking the Lead appears to tackle several of the thorny issues—insufficient business expertise, poor compensation and benefits, and lack of career opportunities—all identified in research as leading to declining rates in FCC. Taken together, these findings suggest that participating in TTL may serve as a protective factor against the decline in FCC. While promising, these results should be interpreted with caution, the primary purpose of TTL was not to conduct formal research therefore the sample size is limited and includes some missing data. This research study was conducted by Robyn Kelton as part of a longitudinal study of the personal and professional impacts of participating in an intensive leadership development academy designed specifically for family child care providers.

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TABLE 1*Pre- and Post- Perceived Knowledge and Skills*

Training Needs Assessment Survey Item	Pre-test		Post-test		
Knowledge Areas: Knowledge of...	M	SD	M	SD	t
The Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS)	3.16	1.16	4.48	0.76	-7.19*
The components of an effective Quality Improvement Plan (QIP)	2.93	1.02	4.57	0.59	-11.52*
Professional resources that support ExceleRate™ Illinois QRIS	2.91	0.98	4.25	0.75	-10.33*
Professional growth aligned with content areas of Family Child Care Credential	3.05	1.14	4.35	0.81	-7.64*
Of fiscal management and recordkeeping strategies that support the fiscal health of small business	2.75	1.04	4.36	0.69	-10.76*
Knowledge of the <i>Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale—Revised (FCCERS-R)</i>	3.23	0.99	4.52	0.792	-8.79*
Skill Areas: How to...	M	SD	M	SD	t
Use reflection and self-awareness as assets in leadership	2.84	0.89	4.41	0.62	-10.19*
Use data from assessments to create and Implement program improvement plan	2.93	0.95	4.39	0.62	-9.66*
Implement change in nonthreatening way	3.02	1.00	4.48	0.63	-8.70*
Involve families in program-wide decision making	2.89	0.82	4.45	0.59	-9.80*
Enhance work quality as both a business owner and educator	2.93	0.95	4.45	0.59	-10.10*
Reduce the incidence of job stress and burnout	3.41	0.90	4.20	0.82	-4.94*
Use visual aids effectively in presentations	2.95	1.01	4.34	0.75	-8.67*
Use the Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS) to measure current practices	2.95	1.20	4.61	0.58	-9.83*
Total TNAS	45.23	10.95	66.61	7.54	-12.54*

Note. n = 44, *p < .001.

TABLE 2

Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS) Assessment Scores for Programs (n=37)

BAS Item	Pre-test		Post-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
1. Qualifications and Professional Development	3.24	2.36	4.59	2.18	-4.49***
2. Income and Benefits	2.16	1.66	5.27	2.13	-4.56***
3. Work Environment	5.27	2.13	6.11	1.73	-2.96**
4. Fiscal Management	1.43	1.32	2.49	2.22	-3.25**
5. Recordkeeping	3.46	1.68	4.62	1.61	-5.11***
6. Risk Management	2.05	1.27	2.86	1.62	-3.77**
7. Parent-Family Communication	2.35	0.95	2.86	1.49	-3.25**
8. Community Resources	2.46	1.48	2.89	1.51	-3.43**
9. Marketing and Public Relations	3.86	1.38	4.22	1.27	-2.71*
10. Provider as Employer (N/A allowed) ^a	1.91	0.81	2.09	0.92	.104
Overall BAS Score	2.86	0.77	3.68	0.94	-10.18***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. ^an = 22.

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For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, contact us at 800-443-5522, or McCormickCenter@nl.edu. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.

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